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Collaboration Overview

A key partner often overlooked in collaborations and programs are the youth who are being served within the program or by the collaboration. Youth involvement can be beneficial to organizations and their programs as well as to the youth themselves.

Programs that are developed in partnership with youth are more likely to be effective at engaging the population and, therefore, to have a greater impact. Involving youth as partners in making decisions that affect them increases the likelihood that the decisions will be accepted, adopted, and become part of their everyday lives. In addition, empowering youth to identify and respond to community needs helps them become empathetic, reflective individuals, setting them on a course to potentially continue this important work in their future careers.

Meaningful youth engagement views youth as equal partners with adults in the decision-making process. Programs and activities are developed *with* youth rather than *for* youth. In this kind of equal partnership, both adults and young people need to be fully engaged, be open to change in how things are done, and share a unified vision for the partnership.

The Children's Bureau within the [Administration for Children and Families \(ACF\)](#) has continuously recognized the value of involving youth and has made it a practice of supporting the involvement of youth in their meetings, through the programs they fund, and through their technical assistance efforts. One example of this is the involvement of youth in the annual National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Technical Assistance Meeting.

What Is NYTD?

Public Law 106-169 required the ACF to develop a data collection system to track independent living services that states offer to youth transitioning out of the foster care system (i.e., mental health services, job skills training, career counseling, etc.). The data collection process was intended to be used to develop outcome measures to assess states' performance in

operating independent living programs. Additional information about the rules and requirements can be found in the [Federal Register](#).

To meet the law's mandate, ACF established the NYTD. States were required to begin collecting NYTD data on October 1, 2010, and must report NYTD data to ACF on a semiannual basis. Additional [information](#) about the history and purpose of NYTD can be found on ACF's website. Technical Assistance for NYTD data collection is provided by the [National Resource Center for Youth Development](#) (NRCYD) and the [National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology](#) (NRCCWDT).

NYTD collects case-level information on youth and the independent living services they receive from state agencies that administer the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program as well as outcomes information on youth who are in foster care or who have aged out of foster care.

States are tasked with collecting the following types of information for the NYTD:

- Basic demographic data on all youth reported to NYTD
- For youth receiving independent living services, states must also report the following:
 - The local agency responsible for serving the youth
 - Whether the youth is a member of a federally recognized Indian tribe
 - The youth's education level and special education status
 - Whether the youth was adjudicated delinquent
- Types of support that youth receiving independent living services during a six-month report period received (i.e., academic support, mentoring, room and board or educational financial assistance, career training, etc.)
- Baseline outcome data from all 17-year-olds in foster care and follow-up outcome data from these youth at ages 19 and 21 (cohort model) in six outcome areas:
 - Financial self-sufficiency (i.e., employment, use of public assistance)
 - Educational attainment (i.e., current enrollment, highest educational certification)
 - Homelessness
 - High-risk behaviors (i.e., substance abuse referral, incarceration, children)
 - Connections with adults
 - Access to health insurance (i.e., Medicaid or other health insurance)

The outcome data must be collected directly from youth through a short survey. Youth may decline to answer any single question on the survey or may decline to participate in the survey all together. How the survey is administered (i.e., by e-mail, phone, in-person interview, or other method) is up to each state. To ensure data can be collected once youth age out of foster care, states must plan for a means of continued communication with these youth.

Why Involve Youth?

The ACF, its partners, and the states have involved some youth and young adults in technical assistance meetings and in the development of the implementation of the NYTD in a number of ways. While youth had been involved in the past, the 2011 NYTD Technical Assistance Meeting was the first time that an emphasis was placed on including youth representatives on each state team. Involving youth transitioning out of the foster care system provided valuable data collection input. The voice of youth and young adults who had experienced the foster care system supplied useful feedback on the types of services and supports youth transitioning from the foster care system need to be successful.

ACF leaders and their partners also hoped that involving youth in the meeting would help generate enthusiasm about NYTD, as youth can be key advocates for the effort and are essential for the success of the ongoing data collection. Active and interested youth and young adults are important to the mission of effecting positive change in foster youth services and outcomes.

While the benefits of youth involvement for ACF and the NYTD team are numerous, youth attendees also took away substantial benefits from the meeting. Participation in the NYTD Technical Assistance Meeting supports youth development by supplying opportunities for young people to network, attend a federal meeting, and present alongside their federal counterparts. Additionally, the meeting provided youth with the opportunity to voice comments and concerns unique to their states. States, in turn, now have access to youth and young adults who not only represent the foster care system but who have engaged in federal discussions of data on youth in transition.

NYTD Technical Assistance Meeting

A technical assistance meeting is held for federal agency staff, technical assistance providers, and state teams on an annual basis. This meeting provides an opportunity for participants to discuss the data collection and reporting process; observations and reflections on NYTD data from the most recent reporting period; and challenges, surprises, and successes that they encountered.

The 2011 NYTD Technical Assistance Meeting was held August 3–5 in Washington, D.C. It was the first meeting at which findings from NYTD data were available for discussion and review. The 2011 meeting was also the first meeting at which youth were in attendance from almost every state as part of the state teams. Delegates aged 18 to 24 from approximately 45 states attended and actively participated in the meeting.

Promising Practices

In order to successfully engage youth in the Technical Assistance Meeting, the ACF employed the following practices:

Include youth as members of state teams

Youth were not simply invited to the meeting as attendees; they were asked to participate as members of their states' teams. This conveyed to youth attendees that they are valued members of the process. Including youth also showed state teams that youth can take active roles in discussions and provide valuable information and expertise based on their own experiences. While it was challenging for some states to identify youth representatives, ACF and its partners provided support and suggestions on possible youth attendees who previously had been involved in youth board development work and other National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) trainings.

Ensure youth are prepared to comfortably and actively participate in the meeting

While some youth attendees had been involved with youth boards and other federal meetings prior to the NYTD meeting, for many it was a new experience. Because of the variability, it was important for meeting staff to focus on ensuring that youth were prepared to participate in the meeting and felt comfortable in the environment.

Prior to and throughout the meeting, NRCYD staff provided training and support to the participating youth. Training included discussions about the expectations, purpose, and structure of the conference. Additionally, travel, per diem, and lodging was arranged for youth attendees in advance of the meeting. Without this planning and support, some state youth representatives might not have been able to attend the meeting, as cost and logistics could have been a barrier to participation.

NRCYD staff created opportunities for youth delegates to connect with one another prior to the meeting. For example, youth participants were invited to join a private Facebook group where they could connect with each other, learn about the meeting, and discuss a number of topics. NRCYD staff members were able to use the Facebook group to disseminate information and create conversation among the youth and young adult designees. The Facebook group was a voluntary option for youth, and NRCYD staff used other methods to communicate with youth who elected not to participate in the group.

Also prior to the meeting, NRCYD staff worked with the youth participants to clarify their roles and responsibilities and to prepare them to engage in conversation and debate with federal counterparts. One of the areas of focus was how to strategically share stories and experiences with the foster care system within the context of the conference. NRCYD has developed a resource focused on [strategic sharing](#) that it uses to help youth think through how they want to share their stories.

Involve knowledgeable and experienced staff to support youth

NRCYD's staff has substantial knowledge and expertise working with youth, particularly those who have been involved with the child welfare system. Included on the NRCYD staff were summer interns—also young adults—and adults who themselves had previous experience in the foster care and child welfare systems. The staff was able to connect with the youth and recognize how to create an environment where they were comfortable. Throughout the conference, NRCYD staff members were available to answer any questions and to provide around-the-clock support to youth attendees. For example, staff designated to work with youth attendees communicated with youth participants by way of phone and e-mail prior to and during meetings. (NRCYD staff provided phone numbers to youth in case youth attendees had questions or problems.)

Convene youth delegates before the meeting begins

Youth attendees were invited for a half-day preconference session designed just for them. This allowed the youth representatives to get to know each other, become familiar with the conference and with their roles, and ask questions in a safe environment. Youth were welcomed by the ACF's Children's Bureau staff and by Commissioner Bryan Samuels of the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Children, Youth and Families. Commissioner Samuels emphasized the important role that youth play in the meeting and in effecting positive outcomes for youth in the foster care system.

During the session, the youth representatives were able to get a first look at the initial findings from the analysis of NYTD data and were provided time to ask questions and reflect on the findings in roundtable discussions with representatives from the Children's Bureau. Children's Bureau staff asked youth to think critically about the data that was presented and think about what it meant and how it could be interpreted. Specifically, the discussions focused on the types of questions that could be generated from the NYTD data; how states can use NYTD data to improve services for youth in foster care and transitioning out of foster care; the ways that youth can use NYTD data to improve outcomes for other youth in the foster care system; and the types of deeper research questions that can stem from the NYTD data. The questions and feedback youth provided helped create a presentation that a select group of youth representatives gave with federal staff and the Commissioner during the conference plenary session.

Throughout the morning session, youth were actively engaged in conversations about the data and in sharing how the data reflected or did not reflect their own experiences.

Create opportunity for youth and young adult delegates to present with federal decision makers

Youth were asked to play an active role in the conference, including the opportunity to present alongside the Commissioner and other federal staff during the plenary session. Encouraging youth to present and share their voices helped to prepare them to actively participate, first hand, in a meeting at a federal level—an opportunity that few youth in transition are able to experience. During the presession, the youth participants from each state worked to analyze and discuss the initial findings from the NYTD data and elected a group of representatives to work with federal staff to develop a PowerPoint presentation that represented their voice. The

representatives then presented the youth perspective to all of the conference attendees during the keynote address. This provided youth with the opportunity to help develop the message, build their public speaking skills, and share their opinions and expertise with the conference attendees. Conference attendees were impressed with the youth speakers' presentations.

Create opportunities for youth to network, expand skill sets, and build résumés

Involving youth in the NYTD Technical Assistance Meeting provided an opportunity for youth to participate in a federally funded meeting as part of state-level teams. This opportunity is rare for youth, and ACF and its partners supported the opportunities for youth to develop skills, network with federal and state staff, and to present at a national conference. For some of the youth, this included presenting alongside the Commissioner and federal staff in a plenary session at the conference.

Youth also had the opportunity to develop their skills in understanding and looking critically at data. The roundtable discussions that were held during the presession provided an opportunity for youth to question the data, apply findings to their own experiences, and learn how to use data responsibly.

Developing a strong network is important as youth transition to adulthood. Through the meeting, youth participants were able to connect with:

- Other youth who are working to improve outcomes for youth in the foster care system
- Federal staff who work at the national level on programs and policies related to child welfare and foster care
- Technical assistance providers that can provide support and foster skill development
- State staff with whom they can develop ongoing partnerships to promote and advocate for NYTD and other programs and policies for youth in the foster care system and transitioning out of the foster care system

Develop youth-friendly materials

The meeting team took care to ensure that presentations and materials were youth friendly. Calls and webinars were held prior to meeting to ensure that the PowerPoint presentations and other handouts included youth-friendly language and were as free of jargon and acronyms as possible.

To ensure that the content was clear and understandable for youth participants, meeting staff developed signs for all attendees with the letters "IDK," to stand for "I don't know" on one side and a question mark on the other side. Participants used the paddles during discussions when they were unclear about what was being said or had specific questions about the content that was shared. Youth, as well as state and federal staff, utilized the paddles throughout the session.

Lessons Learned

While they received positive feedback from youth and adult attendees, ACF leadership learned the following lessons as to how to improve the overall meeting experience in the future.

Select youth who are representative of those in the foster care system as well as those who have transitioned out of the system

Involving youth from almost all 50 states was a huge undertaking and accomplishment, but many of the youth who attended the 2011 meeting had already transitioned out of the foster care system and were too old to participate in state surveys used for the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) data collection. In order to have a more representative group of youth as well as more youth who could provide feedback on the survey administration process, the goal for future meetings is to try and include more youth who are currently involved in the foster care system.

Being more deliberate and strategic in recruiting youth attendees from each state in future meetings, ACF and its partners hope to assist states recruiting youth participants by creating an application process for youth interested in participating in the meeting.

Provide more opportunities for youth to present during the meeting

Youth involvement during the meeting was a significant part of the initiative; however, ACF is considering giving youth an even more substantial role, perhaps opening up opportunities for youth to give more presentations alongside their federal counterparts and participating in the meeting planning process.

Resources

Learn more about the Children's Bureau and their partners:

- Visit the Children's Bureau website: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/>
- Contact the Children's Bureau: NYTDinfo@acf.hhs.gov
- Join the NYTD listserv: send an e-mail to NYTDinfo@acf.hhs.gov
- Visit the NYTD technical assistance webpage: www.nrccwdt.org/resources/nytd/nytd_home.html
- Visit the NYTD Community of Practice: <http://nytdcommunity.acf.hhs.gov>
- Visit the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology: www.nrccwdt.org
- Visit the National Resource Center for Youth Development: www.nrcyd.ou.edu
- Read about the experience of a youth who attended the NYTD conference: <http://findyouthinfo.gov/youth-voices/emily>

Learn more about [Positive Youth Development](#) and [Transition Age Youth](#) by viewing the Youth Topic on www.FindYouthInfo.gov.

